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Each and Every Child

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Out with the old, in with the new

New model gives students full access to all literacy instruction

DES MOINES – Prior to moving to Iowa, 6-year-old Kyle Harlan's main school lesson focused on trying to stop his frequent crying. His lesson? Teachers would record him crying, and then play it back to him.

In their minds, the teachers were trying to shape his behavior.

His mother, Mary Jo, didn't know better. But that was before she moved to Des Moines and met educator Kristi Wickre.

"I had no clue what was going on with Kyle's education," Harlan said. "When we moved here, Kristi opened it all up – she opened my mind to so many things."

That included a device that enabled Kyle – diagnosed with cerebral palsy and epilepsy – to talk.

"He suddenly said, 'Mom, I love you,' and I just started crying. My son was talking to me."

It's a testament to Wickre's powerhouse teaching, who assumes all students can – and will – learn. But it's also a testament to a philosophical change in the way students with significant cognitive disabilities are taught.

"We used to use a traditional readiness model of literacy instruction, where we expected students to learn to read



Special education teacher Kristi Wickre leads her class through a literacy lesson.

Continued on next page



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge.

Teacher Kristi Wickre listens to parent Mary Jo Harlan recall her first encounter with the teacher.

and write only after they had a firm foundation of language," said Emily Thatcher, a consultant at the Iowa Department of Education. "For our students, that literacy model kept them from becoming literate: We have some students who are in the earliest stages of learning to communicate. And yet if speaking is the first thing we focus on, we never get to reading or writing."

Herself a former special education teacher, Thatcher knows well how children with significant cognitive disabilities had been taught before the Iowa Core.

"When I first started teaching, I didn't teach my students the entire alphabet but instead only the letters in their name – we focused on splinter skills," she said. "And in doing so, we limited our students' outcomes because we didn't teach them what other kids learned. We did a disservice to them. We are only limited by what we think they can be."

A philosophical shift on literacy now

focuses teaching the skills of reading, writing, speaking, language and listening concurrently. The concurrent model of literacy instruction has been implemented over the last six-or-so years by a team from the Iowa Department of Education, the University of Northern Iowa and the Center for Literacy and Disabilities Studies of the University of North Carolina.

This literacy instruction is aligned to the Iowa Core English Language Arts Essential Elements. The elements are crafted to align with the Iowa Core, which is a series of challenging standards of what a student should be able to do at specific grade levels. The Essential Elements are targeted for only 1 percent of students on Individualized Education Programs.

"Iowa Core Essential Elements literacy instruction supports increasing students' receptive and expressive communication," Thatcher said. "Without literacy skills, students don't have control over their lives. We segregate and

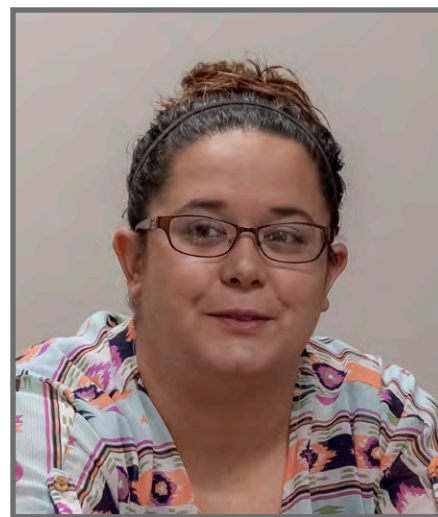
isolate our students when we don't provide them with literacy skills. We now have a very legitimate and understandable way to provide literacy instruction. It's transforming our belief system, our expectations, and outcomes for our students."

The concurrent model is research based, and has been tested in classrooms. To help build capacity statewide, a series of videos created by Iowa Public Television has been made showing teachers and students – including Wickre and Kyle – working on literacy skills.

"If you have any doubt, seeing is believing," Thatcher said.

While Wickre, who teaches at Smouse School in Des Moines, didn't have any doubts, she did have some concerns.

"I had already done shared readings, but I hadn't done much writing with my students," she said. "But I thought that if I am going to do it, I am going to go all in – I will teach the concurrent model."



Mary Jo Harlan

Wickre was reminded that when she first starting using the shared reading and computer programs, "We started seeing how engaged the students



Emily Thatcher

were throughout the day, and it was like, 'hey, this is where we need to go.'"

Though academics now take the primary seat in the classroom, life skills are still

taught through the lens of academics.

"In teaching life skills, it enables the students to use their academic achievements in a real-world setting," Wickre said. "This approach to literacy is better for the kids. They simply learn more."

As for Kyle's mom, she's thrilled she made the move to Iowa.

"I can't imagine what Kyle would be today if we had stayed in Virginia," Harlan said. "I think we might not even know his personality."

And personality he has.

One time, a conversation went this way:

Kyle: Mom?

Mom: What, Kyle?

Kyle: Wait a minute.

Kyle went through that a couple times before it dawned on her that he was pulling her leg, just like any other teenager. And on a trip to visit relatives in Virginia, there was one frequent and regular message: "Are we there yet?"

And then there was a time when he told his sister – who, by her own mother's admission, was acting obnoxiously – to "shut up."

Wickre laughs.

"See? Now we just walked into a teachable moment."

About parent engagement...

Bringing families into the school fold makes for improved academics

KEOKUK – For Zach Wigle, it is all about the parents. For without parents, attendance would not change, nor the graduation rates. Exiting special education would simply be a pie-in-the-sky dream. And improved academics? Forget about it.

But the then-principal at Keokuk High School in southeast Iowa long ago realized merely lip service toward improving parental involvement wouldn't advance the school – any school – to where it should be.

Wigle should know. Since Keokuk High's ramped-up efforts to bring in parents,

graduation rates have improved, as has attendance. More students are exiting special education. And academics overall have shown impressive growth.

"When you engage parents, the students get a better concept of how important education is,"

he said. "It comes down to the students being more vested in their studies."



Zach Wigle

Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Derek O'Riley.

Simple enough – in concept. But in action, it takes a multi-pronged approach involving everyone.

“It’s not a program, it’s a mindset,” Wigle said.

Mindset or not, the school has a heck of a checklist to ensure staff is effectively communicating with parents:

- Summer home visits – particularly for incoming freshmen;
- Parental surveys, in which the school gauges parents’ perspectives on what it is doing well and what it can do better;
- Regular and varied use of social media;
- Syllabi for parents for each class, which underscore how parents can help their children in specific classes; and
- An annual block party, which extends to both the middle school and high school.

The block party, which includes a barbeque, is aimed at bringing families together at the school. The first one, held three years ago, attracted 450. Last

year, it drew 750 people.

No doubt, the reach out to parents is lots of work. But it’s worth it.

“Why do we need to involve parents?” Wigle asks. “Because we need to get better academically. To do so, you have to put relationships first. We have to have healthy adult-to-adult relationships in our building. We have to have healthy adult-to-student relationships in the building. And we have to have healthy student-to-student relationships.

“That mindset comes down to this: Every kid can and should succeed.”

Effective outreach is no longer the domain of an old-school memo to parents.

“I communicate with parents at their level,” said Danielle Vogel, a Level I resource educator. “I text, I email, and

I Facebook – whatever they respond to. When I call parents, sometimes they do not return my call. But if I send a text to them – boom! – they respond immediately. Social media, despite its drawbacks, is very positive, as well.”

But the message



Danielle Vogel

of the communication is every bit as important as the mode.

“It’s really important at the beginning to establish a positive relationship,” Vogel said. “The parents need to know that I’m not just here to complain. When things are going well with a student, I make a point to contact the parents and say, ‘You are not going to believe this!’

“The parents need to know that I truly care about their child, that we are sharing that child and taking him as far as we can. But I cannot do it alone. We need to do it together.”

Vogel cited the annual meeting for the Individualized Education Programs (IEP) as a particularly relevant reason for effective and ongoing communication.

“It used to be that the IEP meetings were scary,” she said. “When the relationship is already established, though, it is a calm experience.”

Keeping the IEP meetings parent-friendly also comes down to when you schedule them, said Matt McGhghy, a Level II behaviorist.

“The IEP meetings are usually based on our schedules,” he said. “Sometimes



Matt McGhghy

you have parents with very diverse schedules. A lot of trust is involved, even in setting up the meeting. So when you ask the time that would work for them, that is a really good first step.”

McGhgy, pronounced Mick-gak-key, likes getting creative with his approach to extending communication. He’s creating business-card-magnets for his parents, which offer his name, telephone number and email.

“You have to remember that not everyone has a smart phone,” he said. “I want to encourage people to contact me.”

And they do.

Tammy Craine, a Level III special education teacher, led a grandmother of one of her students through the process of transitioning him through graduation and into a job.

“We had a kid with severe autism, and his grandmother was absolutely terrified it would not work out for him,” she said. “And if it were up to her, he wouldn’t even have had a chance.

“We convinced her that it would be OK and he ended up flourishing. The

grandmother was thrilled. And it wouldn’t have happened if we didn’t already have a good relationship.”

Associate Principal Heather Davis attributes an increase in exiting students out of special education to the parent outreach.

“The teachers have increased their communications with parents so that the parents know what is going on in the special education room as well as the gen. ed. classroom,” she said. “Parents receiving a full understanding of the breadth of their child’s education really helps. I attribute that communication to the reason so many of our kids are reaching their goals.”

None of this surprises Principal Wigle.

“Our attendance rate has gone up, graduation has gone up – we are at 91.4 percent which is the highest Keokuk



Heather Davis

has even been – we are exiting more kids out of special education,” he said. “We have seen a lot of growth in our standardized assessments.

“Creating a community with the parents is all about fostering leadership – from administration to teachers to parents to students. Everyone has to have ownership, and understand that ownership. It comes down to developing all individuals into better people.”

Postscript: Since the interview late last spring, Wigle has moved on to the Solon Community School District.



Tammy Craine

Next month in

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*“What is **wrong** with that child?”*

Dubuque schools work to rid old notions of what drives bad behavior.